

Largest Farm in the United States

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Lucas Sullivant was born in 1765 in Virginia. He married Sarah Starling, also from Virginia. They moved to Columbus, Ohio, and were some of the earliest settlers in that area. Lucas Sullivant accumulated a vast amount of farmland. One of the three sons of Lucas and Sarah was Michael Lucas Sullivant. M. L. Sullivant was born in 1807 in Columbus, Ohio. Michael was educated at Ohio University, and Centre College, Kentucky. At an early age, he exhibited a great interest in agricultural affairs.

Michael's father died in 1823. After he finished college, Michael settled upon the farm estate he had inherited from his father. He became a stock-grower and grazer. He helped to organize the Ohio State Board of Agriculture.

In October of 1852, Michael first visited Illinois. He decided the fertile prairie lands had great potential as productive farmland. Within four years, Mr. Sullivant purchased about 80,000 acres in the counties of Champaign, Ford, and Livingston. He bought most of this land from the federal government for \$1.50 per acre. Michael also borrowed from East Coast banks to have enough money to start improving the raw prairie lands.

In 1855, he began his first improvement in Illinois at his Broadlands farm in Champaign County. Michael was 48 years old when he started farming in Champaign. In 1861, he and his family moved from Columbus, Ohio, to Champaign, Illinois. In 1866, Michael experienced business problems. He sold the remainder of his Ohio land. He also sold the 23,000 acre Broadlands farm in Champaign to Mr. Alexander for \$250,000. This amount would be equivalent to \$4.3 million in today's dollars. He and his family moved to his 40,000 acre Burr Oaks farm in Ford County in 1867.

M. L. Sullivant was 60 years old when he started to transform the virgin prairie at Burr Oaks to a productive corn farm. In 1868, he was able to break the prairie and plant 1,000 acres of corn. The next year, he converted another 5,000 acres of virgin land to cornfields.

By 1870, the Burr Oak farm attracted national attention as the largest farm in the United States. Harper's Weekly magazine published a fascinating story about how farming was performed on the vast 40,000-acre farm in Central Illinois.

By the time the September 23, 1871, Harper's Weekly article was written, Mr. Sullivant had 11,000 acres of corn growing at Burr Oak. The average yield at that time was 45 bushels to the acre. Besides the cornfields, Mr. Sullivant had 5,000 acres of other crops under cultivation.

The reporter struggled with how to give the magazine readers an idea of the vastness of green oceans of corn grown at Burr Oak. The reporter decided to calculate how big of a corn crib would be required to hold the harvest. He estimated it would take a continuous corn crib that was 12 feet wide, eight feet tall, and five miles in length. This theoretical corn crib would hold 495,000 bushels of ear corn.

Mr. Sullivant first had to break the prairie with its natural vegetation. Teams of oxen were used to pull a breaking plow. This plow cut a furrow twenty inches in width. The primary purpose of this first pass was to turn over the sod and leave a furrow about three inches in depth. This ground was often immediately planted in corn. The first year's harvest would only be about 20 bushels per acre. If there were time to follow the breaking plow with a stirring-plow, the first year's corn crop would increase to 45 bushels per acre. Every bushel of corn saved from the harvest was used to plant eight acres of corn the next season.

Most of the farmland in Central Illinois was wet and swampy. In the 1870s, Mr. Sullivant built drainage ditches in his fields to help remove the excess water. He used a ditching plow that was about 18 feet in length. It had a plowshare that was 11 feet wide and took 68 oxen and eight men to operate it. This work crew could finish three and a half miles of new ditch each day of work.

The machinery used at Burr Oak would handsomely stock two or three agricultural implement stores. This machinery included 150 steel plows, 75 breaking plows, 142 cultivators, 45 corn planters, and 25 gang-harrows. Five blacksmiths were employed to shoe the horses and repair the farm equipment.

The only alcohol allowed at Burr Oak was whiskey used to treat snake bites. Mr. Sullivant was doubtful whether the whiskey would not injure the man more than the snake bite.

Mr. Sullivant organized his 40,000 Burr Oak farm similar to a military command structure. He was the commander-in-chief. Mr. J. M. Miner was his brigadier general. Next in the organization were twelve captains, each with three lieutenants. Each lieutenant had charge of a squad of men. A total of 250 men were employed at Burr Oak farm.

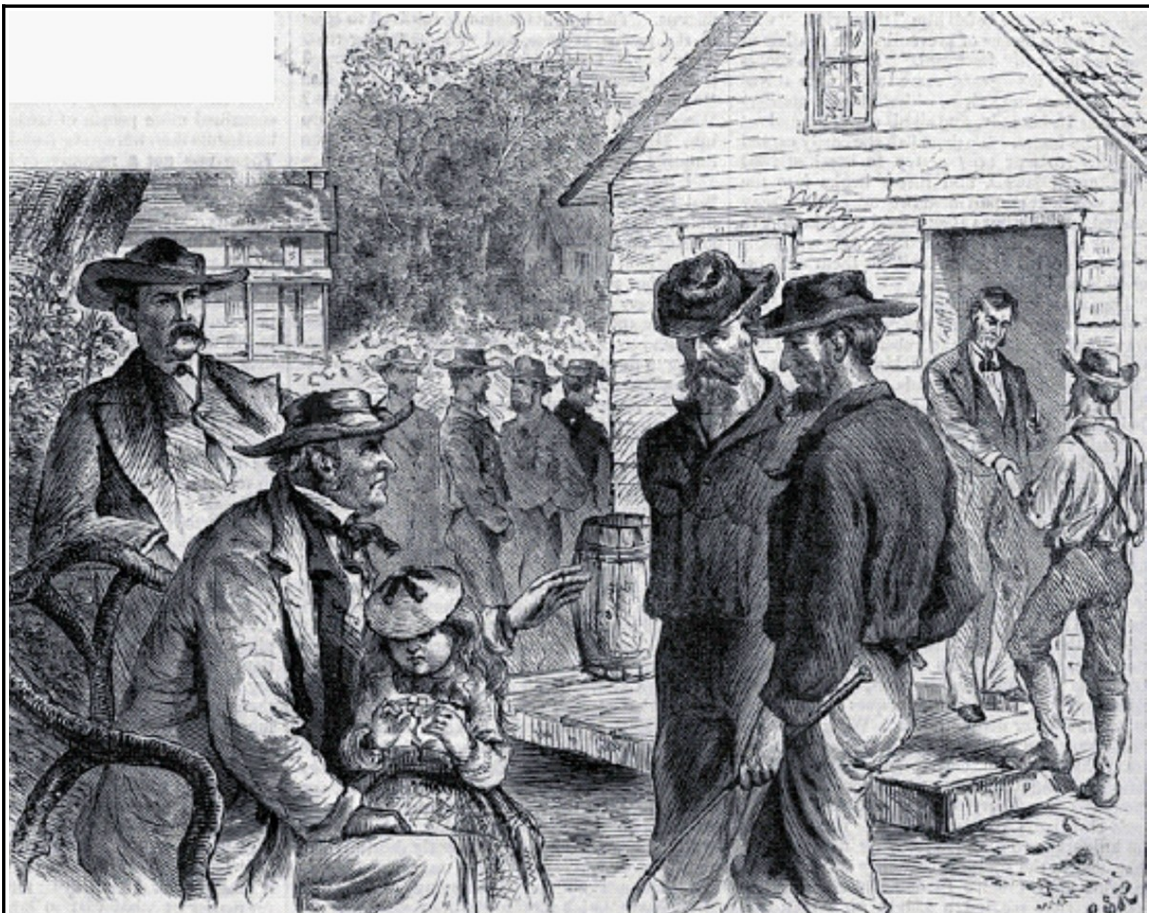
Just as Mr. Sullivant was getting his huge farm operating efficiently, he encountered some massive financial headwinds. The first problem was the Panic of 1873. This panic was a financial crisis that triggered a worldwide economic depression. In addition to the Panic of 1873, Burr Oak farm experienced three bad harvest years in a row. Mr. Sullivant was unable to make the interest payments due to his lenders.

Then Mr. Sullivant became gravely ill in early 1878. A public sale of all his property was held. Mr. Hiram Sibley, of Rochester, N.Y., was his largest creditor, and by this sale became the possessor of 17,641 acres of Burr Oaks Farm. The Equitable Trust Company

and others took the balance of the estate, comprising 14,000 acres. Mr. Sullivant died in January of 1879. Sibley, Illinois, is named after Hiram Sibley.

When Burr Oak farm started to shut down, approximately 100 black men lost their jobs. Most of them moved to nearby Fairbury. After Mr. Sullivant's death, his widow often visited the wife of John J. Taylor in Fairbury. Mr. Taylor was a prominent Fairbury banker.

In 1871, at the age of 64, Michael Sullivant was nationally renowned as the owner and manager of one of the largest farms in the United States. In the next eight years, he would lose his entire 40,000-acre farm, become gravely ill, and die.



Mr. Sullivant and His Captains at Evening Meeting in 1871